

Author Spotlight: Elise Broach

Elise Broach is the author of five novels for young people, including Read to Them *OSOB* selection *Masterpiece*. She also has written several picture books for kids.

At the center of *Masterpiece* is an endearing friendship between a boy and a beetle. What inspired that relationship and why do you think readers embraced it so enthusiastically?

I have always loved animals – any kind of animal – and when I was very young, maybe three or four years old, my brother and I used to catch beetles and roly poly bugs in our backyard in Birmingham, Alabama and play with them. I'm sure the bugs didn't consider it playing! But we were gentle with them and always let them go afterward. So it came pretty naturally to me to write about a boy and a beetle befriending each other. I grew up loving books with human-animal friendships, like *Charlotte's Web* and *The Mouse and the Motorcycle*. I think many readers feel the way I do, that those books are a magical portal into another world. They make us think about animals – whether it's a beetle, a pig, or a mouse – in a different way, and wonder about their feelings and their inner lives.

What interests you about writing mysteries for younger readers?

There are really two parts to this question – what interests me about writing for younger readers, and what interests me about writing mysteries. I love writing for younger readers because of their innate ability to suspend disbelief. E. B. White once said, "Children can sail easily over the fence that separates reality from make-believe. They go over it like little springboks." There are so many possibilities when you write for children, and you don't have to bog yourself down in elaborate explanations of how, for instance, a beetle is able to understand a boy. As for mysteries, I like their puzzly, inter-locking complexity. They force me to be thoughtful and smart when I'm writing, and I think they force my characters and my readers to be thoughtful and smart in order to solve them. All of my mysteries have high stakes, so the sense of danger or dire consequence is strong. Those situations reveal the core of a person's character: how brave or trustworthy or resourceful they are, not to mention how they solve difficult problems.

In your interactions with your readers, what have you found they most embrace about your books? Do they inspire or influence you when you sit down to create a new work?

I am so, so grateful to my readers for their excitement and interest in my books! Fundamentally, writing is a solitary act, and since I am rattling around inside my own head so much of the time, it is just the loveliest thing imaginable to bring characters out into the world and have readers welcome them as friends. I wouldn't say that I have a particular audience of readers in mind when I write a book – if anything, I write stories for the child I once was, who I remember very clearly – but I think the responses of my readers have sifted into my imagination in a deep way, so that my stories are changed because of them. Though none of my books are set in the past, they all blend history and mystery, and include themes of friendship, courage, and moral choices.

I think my readers like the real-life foundation of my mysteries, and the excitement and suspense of knowing something important is at stake.

What has been the most rewarding part of finding an audience with your books?

Oh, there have been so many rewarding things! Sometimes I get an email from a child who has never liked to read, who tells me that one of my books is the first book he or she ever finished. That is a great thrill, to be the gateway to a child's joy in reading. Or when I'm doing school visits, sometimes children will spontaneously run up and hug me, because they loved one of my books and they associate me with the characters in it. Or readers tell me they are dying for a sequel to a book, because they can't stand to let the characters go. Or even if they don't ask about a sequel, readers will pepper me with questions about what happens after the story ends, because they have so taken the characters into their hearts that they imagine their lives unfolding beyond the last page. The other thing that is really satisfying for me is when the historical mysteries and questions that infuse all of my books ignite a passionate curiosity in my readers, so that they begin to explore Shakespeare, or Renaissance art, or the history of the American West, on their own.

What has been your experience with Read to Them's *One School, One Book* program?

My experience with the **Read to Them** program has been amazing. Many schools have discovered *Masterpiece* through **Read to Them**, and I've traveled all over the country to talk to children from kindergarten through fifth or sixth grade who've read the novel for a **One School, One Book** read. There's something so wonderful about entire families reading one book, throughout the school community; it becomes a shared experience, a topic of conversation between parents and children, teachers and students, and children and their siblings and friends. The schools I've visited have come up with the most creative and interesting ways to connect *Masterpiece* with readers. They've not only used the terrific suggestions from **Read to Them**, but they've developed scavenger hunts, game shows, plays, miniature art contests, and their own in-school stolen art mysteries to be solved by students, all based on my book.

Were you a big reader as a child? Which books most inspired you growing up?

I was a huge reader as a child, and still am – of everything from adult fiction to memoir to short stories to poetry to children's books. I had so many beloved books when I was young, but I would say the most inspiring to me as a writer were Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* books, *A Little Princess* and *The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett, *The Great Brain* series by John D. Fitzgerald, and virtually anything by E.B. White. In thinking about those books, the subjects of miniature worlds, magical worlds, history, and adventure clearly always appealed to me.

How do you think you have evolved as a writer since your 2005 debut *Shakespeare's Secret*?

Oh wow, that is a tough question! I think I've gotten better at creating a strong sense of place in my books, at building tension, and at connecting my main character more deeply to the plot, so that every twist of the plot reveals something fundamental about my character, and every quirk of my character creates some distinct possibility in the plot. *Shakespeare's Secret* was the first novel I ever wrote, so I was still learning how to do those things, and I imagine it could take a lifetime to get them right. Fortunately, I have an incredible editor, Christy Ottaviano at Henry Holt, who is an invaluable guide and partner.

Can you tell us about *The Wolf Keepers*, your novel due for release in October?

Yes! I am very excited about it. It's a novel set in Yosemite, about a zookeeper's daughter, a runaway boy who's been hiding out at the zoo and noticing strange happenings at night, and a mystery that involves dying wolves and the secret location of John Muir's lost cabin (which is a real historical puzzle). Muir lived in Yosemite for a few years in the mid-nineteenth century, and wrote much about his experiences there, but nobody has ever been able to find the exact location of the cabin he built. In *The Wolf Keepers*, my two characters end up deep in the wilds of the park, in all sorts of danger, trying to figure that out. And as I type this, I'm happily realizing that my themes of history and mystery, friendship, courage, and moral choices are all part of the story! :)